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ABSTRACT

Concern for the dropout phenomenon among secondary learning disabled (LD) students led to a preliminary study of an urban school's decision-making structures, as well as events that influence ninth graders' behavior and decisions, increasing their risk for dropping out of high school. Data were collected from three sources: observation of school staffing committee meetings (designed to address serious problems of referred students), 17 school personnel interviews, and 14 interviews with ninth graders, including 5 identified as LD. It was concluded that orientation activities and academic scheduling procedures were not effective in integrating students quickly into high school activities or sustaining them throughout the school year. In addition, the energy and resources expended on problem students referred for staffing far exceeded that which was expended on incoming ninth graders before problems were reported. Further study of the high school experiences of ninth graders in relation to the dropout issue is planned. (JW)

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NINTH GRADE FOR THE LD STUDENT AT RISK FOR HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT

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Running Head: Ninth Grade

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Ninth Grade For the LD Student At Risk for High School Dropout

Educators concerned with the dropout phenomenon among secondary LD students must be particularly attentive to the ninth grade experience. In a recent follow-up study of LD and non-LD graduates and dropouts from a large urban school district, Zigmond and Thornton (1985) found that ninth grade failure was a strong correlate of high school dropout, both for LD and non-LD students. Students who had graduated from high school had not repeated ninth grade; a large proportion of those who had dropped out were ninth grade repeaters. It seemed that failure in ninth grade was an important variable that increases students' risk for dropping out of high school.

To understand ninth grade as a critical point in the school career of LD and non-LD students, a prospective case study was undertaken which focuses on the context for ninth graders' experiences, the personnel who serve as decision-makers within this context, and ninth grade students themselves. The central concerns of this study in its initial year are the school decision-making structures and events that influence ninth graders' behavior and decisions and that increase their risk for high school dropout. In this paper we review the research activities and findings that mark the first year of a two year project.

Procedures

Setting

The setting for this study is an urban comprehensive high school serving 1632 students in grades 9-12. This school is one of twelve high schools in a school district of approximately 40,000 students in grades K-12. The school is located in a predominately white working class neighborhood. The busing pattern

of the school district creates a racial mix of 25% black and 75% white among the student population. Of the 1632 students, 519 are ninth graders; There are 390 tenth graders, 388 eleventh graders and 335 twelfth graders. Within the ninth grade, 60 students are repeaters. There are 69 students with learning disabilities currently attending this school (4%): 29 LD students are ninth graders, 23 are tenth graders, 13 are eleventh graders and 4 are twelfth graders. The dropout rate for this school is about 27 per cent.

Data Collection Procedures

A prospective case study methodology was used as the vehicle for understanding the impact of high school on ninth grade students' behavior and decisions. This approach permitted researchers to become familiar with the school's structures, events, and decision-making procedures, and to "be there" as students reacted in ways that might lead them to high school dropout. Data were collected from three sources: committee meetings, personnel interviews, and student interviews.

Careful collection and integration of these various data bases proceeded over the course of the school year. Information provided by students about school structures was cross-checked in school documents and staff reports, and vice versa. Program descriptions were validated through on-site observations of key meetings. An on-going cycle of question generation, data collection, and data analysis was maintained.

1) Observation of the school staffing committee.

The school staffing committee was created in this school as a vehicle for addressing student problems that are of a more serious nature than routine school structures can accommodate. These include excessive and chronic problems related to academic failure, poor attendance rates, and inappropriate conduct. Each week this committee convenes to review the current status of students in trouble and respond to referrals of new problem students, often by developing interventions for these students. The participants include primarily support personnel (counselors, social workers, the school psychologist) and the principal. Another important function of this group is to monitor any interventions employed as responses to school crises and to make recommendations for dropping students from the school.

The principal suggested that we begin our work with observations of the weekly staffings so that we could meet the school's support personnel and become familiar with resources available to the school. During the initial month of data collection, detailed notes of those meetings were maintained. An early analysis of those notes was extremely helpful in identifying the school's general policies, decision-making procedures and decision-makers and in defining subsequent research activities. In the course of the school year 16 staffings were observed.

2) Interviews with school personnel.

Interviews were conducted with high school personnel utilizing the general interview guide approach (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Patton, 1978). While the questions were not standardized, they included both specific probes and opportunities for spontaneously generated information. Staff were asked to talk about school policies, structures, their own roles within these structures, and

their perceptions of how school structures, events, and decisions impinge on ninth graders. They were asked about their views of ninth graders in general, and specifically the students "at risk": their problems with high school, the problems they present to the school, and school "solutions" to these sets of problems.

Interviews were conducted with 17 school personnel including the principal, vice principals (2), social workers (2), counselors (4), school psychologist, and a sample of teachers: homeroom teachers (4), ninth grade teachers (2), and special education teachers (2). Six of these staff members were interviewed more than once to clarify points or to obtain additional information as the on-going analyses generated an alternately fuzzy or focused picture of the school.

3) Interviews with ninth graders.

Fourteen ninth graders participated in an initial round of interviews: six students defined by the school as "at risk" for dropout, and eight students selected from the rest of the school's ninth graders. School personnel had characterized a subset of students as "at risk" for dropping out of school because of their excessive absenteeism and failing grades. Among the interviewees were five LD students, one in the "at risk" group.

Students were asked to talk about several aspects of ninth grade: orientation, scheduling, academics, discipline, attendance, extracurricular activities, school resources, and information systems. They were also asked about their goals for high school and beyond; and, they were asked how they would change ninth grade, if given the opportunity.

Results

The analysis consisted of two concurrent activities: data reduction, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The raw data were continually reduced by coding the field notes and interview notes, recording emerging patterns, and summarizing preliminary analyses in memo form. The data reduction facilitated drawing tentative conclusions which were confirmed or rejected through a review of other data sources.

1) Observations

Observations of the staffing committee meetings provided information on the efforts made by this high school staff to deal with individual and chronic student problems. Considerable energy was put into helping students who were truant, failing classes, and conflicting with school expectations. Thirty-seven different interventions were discussed over the course of seven consecutive meetings. These clustered into six categories: individual treatments, school-wide innovations, disciplinary policies, parent involvement, cross-district alternatives, and outside agencies. Each of these categories is described below.

Individual treatments included utilization of available school resources as well as adaptations of existing policies. Individual contracts were written with numerous students who had been suspended from school repeatedly so that they had a chance to return and make up their work. Students were scheduled to meet with the school psychologist as necessary. The counselors and social workers also established arrangements to meet individual student needs. For

example, the social worker arranged an "open door" policy for a particular student so that she would always be able to talk with someone. A modified schedule was arranged for a student who was successful in periods 2-7, but continually came late to first period. In other situations, a class change, consultation with a teacher regarding a specific management plan, and counseling about repeated failing grades were implemented to facilitate a student's success in school.

School-wide innovations were also implemented. A special homeroom program for two groups of at risk ninth graders was one example of this; two teachers were assigned to each homeroom to provide the student with extra support and to call their homes and follow up on excessive absenteeism or poor grades. A special academic adaptation was also offered to some ninth graders who experienced academic failure during the first semester; they had the opportunity to pass their ninth grade classes through intensive work during the second semester and summer school.

In response to specific violations of school rules, disciplinary policies were adapted to the needs of individual students. The school options included in-house suspension, out-of-school suspension, community service during suspension, a daily sign in system for individual students as well as school-wide sweeps to check on students' whereabouts. Although there are district guidelines, school administrators can tailor discipline procedures to the needs of individual students.

Parental involvement was encouraged in one subset of interventions. School personnel were sometimes able to meet with family members at the school or in the home to discuss student performance. Parents were often involved in contract interventions. On occasion, a parent was asked to accompany a student on his daily schedule to monitor his whereabouts and behavior. Letters of

support were sent to parents who cooperated with the school regarding their child's attendance.

As appropriate, district resources were utilized for individual students. These included transfers to other high schools or to alternative schools. The programs available within the district were sometimes recommended for individual students.

School personnel also maintained contact with outside agencies. Liaison with group homes, juvenile court, drug and alcohol programs, etc. allowed personnel to make informed recommendations and coordinate programming for students involved with agencies.

Over the course of six months the staffing committee met sixteen times. During seven meetings conducted from mid-January through March 1987, 66 students were discussed. Over fifty-five percent of these students were ninth graders.

2. School Personnel Interviews

Responses of school personnel to the review questions corroborated information collected through observations. The major transition problems of ninth graders seemed to be obtaining information and getting individual attention. Although school rules are explained at the beginning of the year, it was reportedly difficult to provide integral information to all students because so many students miss the first weeks of school or transfer in and out of the high school throughout the year. Ninth graders were described as needing support and attention from adults, but teachers and support personnel found it difficult to arrange meetings with students in a crowded school with large ninth grade classes.

Scheduling was another factor cited as problematic for ninth graders. Some scheduling difficulties reportedly stemmed from decisions made in eighth grade. If a student was misplaced in a subject level, frustration often led to cutting and failure. In general, there seemed to be a problem changing schedules at the beginning of ninth grade. Counselors were often unable to accommodate the numerous requests at this time of the year. In large ninth grade classes, the teacher could not always identify the misplaced student until well into the first grading period. Other problems resulted because of inappropriate course alternatives for some students. (For example, all students are required to take the same social studies class, regardless of their reading level.) Finally, options such as vocational classes were not typically accessible to ninth graders. Counselors felt it was important to schedule students for the maximum academic subjects in ninth grade so that they could meet the requirements for graduation. It was also noted that participants must be 16 years old and that vocational courses are "saved" for upperclass students.

Numerous personnel indicated that ninth graders fail to participate in extracurricular activities. Reportedly few activities are appropriate for ninth graders; although there are fewer students in the upperclass grades, most activities are geared for these students. Participation on sports teams is also infrequent for ninth graders. Staff reported that most ninth graders have difficulty competing with upperclassmen. In addition, at-risk students are often ineligible for these activities because of the district academic criteria. Despite the possible benefits of extracurricular activities for ninth graders, their participation is minimal.

Finally, the interviewees reported that when students cut class there is inconsistent disciplinary action by teachers and administrators. A reportedly time-consuming procedure makes it difficult for teachers to communicate cuts

daily. The cutting pattern was described as escalating over the year because of the inconsistent follow through.

3. Student Interviews

A review of the student interview data revealed that, despite differences in the school-defined "at risk" status of the students, the responses of all 14 students across questions were remarkably similar. Students were asked to reflect on the school events that constitute the high school's orientation for ninth graders. These included contact during their eighth grade year, a summer orientation day, and a ninth grade program on the first day of the school year. All students reported that the contact with high school personnel during middle school had been minimal. A high school counselor visited an English class during the spring of eighth grade at which time students were "scheduled" for their ninth grade classes. Only eight students had attended the summer orientation and they could not describe the experience very fully. Reports of the ninth grade assembly on the first day of high school were equally vague, and only seventy percent of the students had attended. Those who did attend remembered that school rules had been reviewed but they could not recall which rules, and most said they learned about school rules if (or as) they broke them (or saw their peers break them). All of the students reported similar experiences during the early days of ninth grade: they reported being confused, getting lost, thinking their classes were taught differently from middle school, and not knowing many students.

When asked about their class assignments for ninth grade, most students reported that they were taking the classes for which they had signed up during

eighth grade. Several had requested a schedule change in the fall (many from algebra I to basic algebra). One student reported that his homeroom teacher had "forgotten" to take his request to the counselor's office in time for the schedule change so he was stuck in algebra I. The student was receiving a "D" in this course, but he seemed complacent about it, remarking that his other courses were going "OK." Most students perceived that they did not make decisons to make about what to take; there were not very many choices and the counselor had the final say. When asked about vocational courses, most of the students were not sure what "vocational" meant and were unaware of the courses.

All students interviewed at mid year reported that ninth grade was going "OK"; they were passing their courses and they characterized themselves as "good" with respect to school conduct and attendance. Few of them reported participating in extra-curricular activities; they felt that there was not anything that interested them. Their feelings about school ranged from indifference to acceptance. Only four of the 14 students said that they thought there was school spirit. Most students said there was "not much," and cited poor attendance at sports events as their evidence. Yet few of these students were regular attenders of school sports events.

All of the students could readily identify an adult in the school to whom to turn for help or for answers to questions, but none of the adults identified was a class teacher. Most students mentioned either their counselor or the school social worker, (the LD students mentioned the counselor assigned to special education students, one student in the pilot ninth grade homeroom mentioned the homeroom teacher).

When asked about their knowledge of the school discipline procedures, the students all knew the types of behaviors that result in disciplinary action (e.g., cutting classes, fighting, being tardy) and the range of disciplinary

possibilities (e.g., detention, suspension). None of the students were sure about which "punishment" went with which "crime." Few students could recall when or how they had learned about the specific rules.

Nearly all students mentioned homeroom as a potential information source but one that was unreliable both in substance and accessibility. Students reported that the ten minute homeroom time was very noisy and disorganized. They described it as a time when roll is taken and announcements are made (though most said that they rarely could hear the accouncements on the intercom).

Student "recommendations" for changing ninth grade were nearly identical in theme: "make it smaller;" "put all the ninth graders in one small building;" "have more activities just for ninth graders." The wish for some form of special attention was evident.

Discussion

The purpose of this study to date has been to identify and understand the decision-making structures and events within a high school that affect the school experiences and decisions of ninth graders, LD and non-LD, and the extent to which they influence student risk for dropping out of high school. From our findings to date we conclude that orientation activities and academic scheduling procedures are not effective in adequately integrating students into high school.

Interview data from ninth grade students and school personnel indicate that there are three school events that are structured explicitly to orient ninth graders: a high school counselor visits incoming ninth graders toward the end of their eighth grade; an optional summer orientation program is offered to

incoming ninth graders the week before school opens; and the opening day of school is set aside so that only ninth graders report to school in order to meet their teachers and review their schedules without the distraction of upperclassmen.

Several things are noteworthy about these events. All of these events take place before ninth grade has actually begun. Each event is organized to transmit important information about school expectations to the entering ninth graders. The information is related to school variables associated with risk for high school dropout (namely academic information, rules for conduct and attendance). However, a large proportion of ninth graders interviewed do not attend one or more of these events and students who did attend had difficulty remembering what was said. No events like these were scheduled systematically during the year to repeat the information. Thus the major events for disseminating to ninth graders information that is deemed critical for their survival in high school occur at points when students who attend report feeling "confused, frightened, and lost," and many ninth graders are not in attendance. A logical mechanism for repeating this orientation information at frequent intervals throughout the year would be the daily homeroom period. However, from student and staff reports, homeroom is very noisy, disorganized, and tardy students miss this experience completely.

Academic scheduling is another decision-making structure that is not working to the advantage of ninth graders. Since scheduling is done by the students' counselor shortly after the third report period of eighth grade, decisions must be made without complete information about student performance. One would assume that the schedules could be modified in the fall, so that students do not take courses for which they lack prerequisite skills. However, school personnel and ninth graders both report that changing schedules is not

easy and once made, schedules are usually maintained. The impact of this inflexibility is predictable: If a student spends time in a class that requires perpetual struggle, where his efforts are met with failing marks, where, as one student commented "I didn't know enough to know what questions to ask" - then his/her class behavior and/or attendance are likely to deteriorate, all of which increase the student's risk for dropping out.

Once students fail or misbehave or stop attending school, there is a mechanism in place through which the school can respond: the staffing procedure. The staffing committee is intense and flexible in its efforts to keep students in school. The numerous interventions on behalf of referred ninth graders are impressive. However, there appears to be a significant disparity between the energy and resources expended on students referred for staffing and incoming ninth graders before they are in trouble. Orientation acivities are not effective in preparing ninth graders for the transition to high school. Our interview data consistently portray a school without events to integrate students quickly into school activities or sustain them throughout the school year. School is not characterized as "personal"; students and their teachers are not "connecting."

These findings are quite consistent with other reports of secondary schools (Goodlad, 1984). But our impressions to date are preliminary. They prompt us to look further into the high school experiences of ninth graders. We will monitor student progress, and continue to interview students at frequent intervals. We will also focus increased attention on teachers of ninth graders to understand what teachers need in order to be more effective with these students. Our goal is to understand schooling of ninth graders and its link to the dropout issue so that we can develop recommendations for school personnel that will enhance the ninth grade experience.

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